

An intriguing idea

A nonprofit entity to reverse Balboa Park's decline deserves a look

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As Balboa Park approaches the 100th anniversary of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915-1916, it is definitely showing its age. Decades of tight city budgets and postponed maintenance of the park's magnificent Spanish Renaissance buildings have contributed to a slow decline that must be reversed.

A broad-scale revival of the park in time for the centennial of the Panama-California world's fair, which celebrated San Diego as the first American port of call on the Pacific Coast upon the opening of the Panama Canal, is a worthy civic goal.

San Diego's general fund, beleaguered by declining tax revenues and soaring pension fund obligations, is not a promising source for the \$238 million in identified repair projects waiting to be tackled in the park. But a citizens study group known as the Balboa Park Committee has proposed an intriguing alternative: establishment of a nonprofit entity to raise money for improvements and to help cover the park's annual operating costs.

This model has been followed successfully in other cities where beloved parks have fallen into disrepair. The lesson is that private citizens quite often will open their wallets to preserve an urban recreational oasis. New York City's Central Park, for example, has undergone a remarkable rejuvenation through private contributions raised by a nonprofit conservancy, which helps manage the park and pay for part of its upkeep. St. Louis, a community closer in size to San Diego, has revived its Forest Park through the same kind of mechanism.

Balboa Park, created by visionary civic leaders in 1868 when a 1,400-acre parcel was preserved as green space, is San Diego's premier landmark. Millions of residents and tourists flock each year to its gardens, museums, art galleries, zoo and many other cultural and recreational amenities. Our hunch is that a nonprofit conservancy could generate significant financial support, not just from philanthropists but also from everyday San Diegans who love Balboa Park.

The Balboa Park Committee's recommendation is not a panacea for Balboa Park's lack of financial wherewithal. But it is a promising idea that deserves a careful look by Mayor Jerry Sanders and the City Council. Certainly no one else as yet has offered a better idea.